

# WESTERN BALKANS AS BASE FOR RADICAL ISLAMISTS

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General Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

WESTERN BALKANS AS BASE FOR RADICAL ISLAMISTS, by Major Zoran Ivanov, 86 pages.

This thesis addresses the primary research question: Are the Balkans becoming a European sanctuary for radical Islamists. Research is focused on what are the factors that contribute in creation of favorable condition for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. There are three perspectives addressed in the analysis. First, the European influence in relations of geopolitical communication with the Western Balkans. The second perspective is the Western Balkans as a primary region and how its countries with their actions (or passiveness) are contributing to creation of the factors that favor radical Islamists. The last perspective is Balkan Muslims and their role in this complex environment

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Balkans has a long history of continuous conflicts. The traditions of conflicts continued after the downfall of the former Yugoslavia. Ethno-nationalistic politics were the driving force. This nationalistic driven policy blinds the leaderships of the countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia and makes them vulnerable to irregular threats. In the post-communist period in the Balkans the key leadership within the countries have sought short-term political goals in order to satisfy their self-interests. Meanwhile, they created the idea that the “State” must take care of the people, and people should not interfere in “State” matters. The main idea behind this approach is to generate freedom of decision-making driven by personal agenda.

The dynamics of the changing security environment over the past decade have produced a new adversary, which is a hybrid of terrorists, criminals, insurgents and religious extremists. An area, such as the Balkans, with continuous ethnic conflict and nationalistic driven policy with less democratic control, strongly influenced and micromanaged by Europe is a permissive environment for adversaries’ freedom of movement and operations.

Does all of this set the preconditions for a new actor in the very complex geopolitical environment? On top of the many ethnic, territorial, and political disputes between the Balkan countries, radical Islam is becoming a new force in the Balkans. Its influence will have long-term effects. In order to address the thesis question - Are the Balkans becoming the European sanctuary for radical Islamists? - It is essential to



research the interconnection between radical Islamist organizations, individuals from the Balkans and the European centers of Islamic power.

The historical background of the Muslim population in the Balkans dates back to the time of the Ottoman Empire. Their cultural and sociological structure has a centuries-long history. Muslims continued to live together with the rest of the peoples in the Balkan countries. During the 500 years of Ottoman rule, some indigenous people converted to Islam to seek better positions in society, based on many different taxes the non-Muslim population had to pay. Over time, they became the resident Muslim population in the Balkans. They practiced traditional Islam and have always lived and shared the same destiny with the rest of the population in the Balkans. There are many examples of mixed Muslim and Christian cities, towns and villages in Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania where people of both faiths have lived with no ethnic disputes and conflicts for centuries. None of the Balkan disputes have religious origins. The influences of the Islamists are creating unrest between Muslim populations and the rest of the society that lead to conflict within the states of the Western Balkans. Islamists devote great effort to prove that the current practice of Islam within the Balkan Muslim communities is not the correct one. Their message of strong Islamic rhetoric is one of the ways to spread their ideology, and the many militant extremists within the Muslim communities are the means to correct the traditional way of practicing Islam in the Balkans.

The Islamists in the Balkans focus their influence on countries like Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have a traditionally higher percentage of Muslim population. The Commission of European Communities

Report in 2008 grouped these countries into the new political term “Western Balkans,”<sup>1</sup> categorizing them as one part of the Balkans. The research of my thesis will focus on conditions that create a favorable environment for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans.

### The Research Question

“Radical Muslim imams and nationalist politicians from all camps are threatening Sarajevo's multicultural legacy. With the help of Arab benefactors, the deeply devout are acquiring new recruits. In the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans,’ Islamists are on the rise.”<sup>2</sup>

In the past 10 to 15 years, Islamists have become a very serious actor in the already complex Balkan security environment. The primary research question of this thesis is a product of contemporary developments in the Western Balkans.

Are the Western Balkans becoming a European sanctuary for radical Islamists? I found that answering this question is necessary in order to understand the security environment in the Balkans and its impact on European security. The intent is to produce a clear picture of the security environment while building a security strategy to counter the threat. In addition, it will prepare the ground for further research on this topic.

To answer the primary question for the thesis, this paper will address a secondary question. How do Western European influences contribute to the creation of the factors that favor radical Islamists?

The processes of Muslim immigration to Europe played the key role in setting the Muslim base in a predominantly Christian continent. European countries were focused on getting cheap labor.<sup>3</sup> Miscalculation of the long-term consequences resulted in a great challenge of discrimination within the EU. To overcome the silent discrimination, Europe

has embraced the idea of multiculturalism, which was set to failure before it started.<sup>4</sup>

While European nations were building the nation states, they also built the boundary between Western Europe vis-à-vis the Balkans and Eastern European countries.

Communism was the threat that needed to be countered. Luckily, in Eastern Europe, communism culminated and it was easy for Western Europe to support a transition process in order to grant EU membership. While European countries were building democratic societies, the Western Balkans was overwhelmed by nationalism and ethnic disputes. This created conditions for radical Islamists to set up their base and to connect with European Muslims. In order to prevent escalation in the European neighborhood, the EU got involved in the transformation of the Balkans to put the region on the EU track.

I will address the Western Balkan influence when answering the second secondary question, which is how the Western Balkans countries contribute to the creation of the factors that favor radical Islamists.

The Western Balkans is the link between Europe and radical Islamists. The Balkans is a very complex environment, rich with a diversity of religions, cultures and ethnicities. It is a southern center for all economic and road communication from and towards Europe. The 1990s, a key period for the Balkans, produced a number of outcomes. First, nationalism and ethnic disputes rose to a level where there was no clear future for a stable and secure region. The second result, which has transnational consequences, was that radical Islamists set up their base on European soil. These results emerged from the following events. The bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia created the conditions where in the Muslims from Bosnia were portrayed as victims. The international community became involved to stop the ethnic violence. On the other hand,

radical Islamists exploited the opportunity and started a new jihad. A little less than 10 years later, the Kosovo conflict broke out. The international community decided that the Milosevic regime needed to fall. The radical Islamists again exploited the conditions and strengthened their base in the Balkans. The Balkan countries have been in the process of transition and on the EU path for more than 20 years. The long lasting transition has created an insecure, politically unstable situation for further economical development. Having no clear future the Muslim youth becomes an easy target for the radical Islamists.

I will address the Western Balkan Muslims' role and influence in the third secondary question: what is the role of the Balkan Muslims in spreading the radical Islamists' ideology?

Balkan Muslims are quite different from the European Muslims and other Muslim countries. Even though their religion is Islam, Balkan Muslims have an identity rooted in nationality, region or place of residence. Their history is deeply connected with the non-Muslim population. They share the same history, culture, and hundreds of years of life. All of this makes the Balkan Muslims resistant to the influence of radical Islamists. They will resist changes in their lives directed by radical Islamists because their identity is more nationally, regionally or locally focused than Islamically oriented.<sup>5</sup> However, over time if their socio-economic status does not improve, Balkan Muslims may prove more susceptible to the radical Islamists' influence. Radical Islamists do not have a set time line to achieve their ideological goals. They are dedicated to the cause no matter how long it takes. It is to be expected that the threat from radical Islamists will affect generations of Muslims.

### Assumptions

The results from my research will give a clear understanding of factors that create certain conditions that favor the concentration of radical Islamists in the Balkans and will serve as a basis for further research. The threat of radical Islamists is a contemporary issue for many countries; the result from my research will remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

Recent events are pointing to a clear and present threat from radical Islamists. I start my research with the assumption that Western Europe, the Western Balkan countries and the Balkan Muslims are key elements that significantly contribute to the creation of conditions that favor concentration of radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. These elements are essential because their influence will create conditions for other terrorist groups, radical Islamists organizations and their affiliates to establish themselves in the Western Balkans. I will also assume that the threat from radical Islamists is in latent phase in the Balkans in order to reorganize and reconciliation.

### Definitions

Islam. Islam is the monotheistic religion articulated by the Qur‘an, a text considered by its adherents to be the verbatim word of God and by the Prophet of Islam Muhammad's teachings and normative example (which is called the Sunnah in Arabic, and demonstrated in collections of hadiths). *Islam* literally means —submission” to God.<sup>6</sup>

Islamism (Islamist). The belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life.<sup>7</sup> It is the belief that Islam is a political ideology, as well as a faith. It is a modernist claim that political sovereignty belongs to God, that the Shari‘ah should be used as state law, that Muslims form a political rather than a religious bloc around the

world and that it is a religious duty for all Muslims to create a political entity that is governed as such. Islamism is a spectrum, with Islamists disagreeing over how they should bring their 'Islamic' state into existence. Some Islamists seek to engage with existing political systems, others reject the existing systems as illegitimate but do so non-violently, and others seek to create an 'Islamic state' through violence. Most Islamists are socially modern but others advocate a more retrograde lifestyle. Islamists often have contempt for Muslim scholars and sages and their traditional institutions; as well as a disdain for non-Islamist Muslims and the West.<sup>8</sup>

Salafi. Salafi is a term often used to describe fundamentalist Islamic thought. Adherents more often refer to the teachings of the reformer Abd Al-Wahhab as *Salafi*, that is, "following the forefathers of Islam." This branch of Islam is often referred to as "Wahhabi," a term that many adherents to this tradition do not use. Members of this form of Islam call themselves *Muwahhidun* ("Unitarians," or "unifiers of Islamic practice"). They use the *Salafi Da'wa* or *Ahlul Sunna wal Jama'a*. Wahhabism is a particular orientation within Salafism. The most puritanical groups in the Muslim world are Salafi in orientation, but not necessarily Wahhabi.

Wahhabism. Wahhabism [Wahabism] is a reform movement that began 200 years ago to rid Islamic societies of cultural practices and interpretation that had been acquired over the centuries. The followers of Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) began as a movement to cleanse the Arab bedouin from the influence of Sufism. Wahhabis are the followers of Ibn 'Abd ul-Wahhab, who instituted a great reform in the religion of Islam in Arabia in the 18th century.<sup>9</sup>

Western Balkans. A political term that refers collectively to part of the Balkans region that includes the countries of Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### Limitations

The research of my thesis will be based on the collection of information from open sources, due to the sensitivity of classification of information collected by other means. The first limitation of my research will be limited resources about current trends of radical Islamists' activities and their influence in the Western Balkans. The only sources of current events for my research are a limited number of books, online journals and magazines. This topic is a contemporary issue for many countries. Its sensitivity is subject to many criticisms from different perceptions of who the radical Islamists are and what they are doing. All of the sources of information are from data that is collected by the publisher's abilities or declassified information by different governments that were acquired by authors and journalists for their writing needs and interpreted in their own way.

### Scope and Delimitations

In examining the Western Balkan countries, this thesis will examine the period between 1990 and 2010. The analysis of the data is a three-step process. First, the study examines Europe as a whole, identifying those factors that enable the spread of Islam in Western Europe and those that define the relationship between Western Europe and the Western Balkans. Second, the study considers factors in the Western Balkans that set the conditions for radical Islamists' activities and the lengthy road the countries of the

Western Balkans face as they strive for integration with Western Europe. Third, this study analyzes Muslims in the Western Balkans and Western Europe, along with the spread of radical Islam in Europe.

To avoid bias, I will conduct a rigorous examination of source material to identify and filter out biased data. I will also compare information from different sources in order to examine the validity of the information. I am aware of my perceptions of the security environment and am fully dedicated to conducting unbiased research in order to provide a relevant result that can be used in the creation of security policies.

### Significance of the Study

The main goal of the thesis is to explore the linkage between Western Europe and the Western Balkans in correlation with the threat from radical Islamists. The results of my research will give the relationship of the changes in the security environment and the creation of certain conditions that favor radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. The approach of my research will assist in resolving some of the controversies about the security environment in the Western Balkans in correlation with the threat of radical Islamists.

The significance of my thesis is directly connected to the multidimensional process of understanding the improvements of national security systems. The product of this research will assist in creating a clear picture of the security environment in order to produce suggestions and recommendations for Western Balkan countries to counter the emerging threat.



## Summary and Conclusion

The period under study in this thesis is the most significant for defining how the security environment is entering into the new era with the emerging new threats. Europe has focused on creating a “Europe without borders” and the Balkan countries were struggling to overcome their multidimensional, long lasting disputes. In this complex environment, the radical Islamists exploit the opportunity to create a base on European soil and expand their influence to the West.

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<sup>1</sup>“Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective,” Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, May 3, 2008, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/378> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Walter Mayr, “The Prophet's Fifth Column: Islamists Gain Ground in Sarajevo,” *Spiegel Online International*, February 25, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,609660-2,00.html> (accessed September 18, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>David Pryce-Johns, “Europe’s terrible transformation,” *Freerepublic.com*, 2007, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1859375/posts> (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Weaver, “Angela Merkel: German multiculturalism has utterly failed,” *Guardian.co.uk*, October 17, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-german-multiculturalism-failed> (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>Author’s personal experience gained during time spent in Bosnia, Kosovo and living in Macedonia. During this time, the author gained significant experience in way of life of the Balkan Muslims by engaging various Muslims people in these countries.

<sup>6</sup>Center for Muslim-Jewis Engagement, “Muslim Texts,” <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/notislam/misconceptions.html#HEADING1> (accessed September 20, 2010).

<sup>7</sup>S. Berman, “Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society, Perspectives on Politics,” *American Political Science Association* 1, no. 2 (June 2003), <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=152989> (accessed September 20, 2010): 258.

<sup>8</sup>Definition of Islamism according to UK counter-extremism think tank, Quilliam, March 2011, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/index.php/component/content/article/769> (accessed March 5, 2011).

<sup>9</sup>Globalsecurity.org, “Wahhabi,” <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/wahhabi.htm> (accessed October 21, 2010).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

It appears that radical Islamists started to build a ground base in the Balkans concurrently with the violent breakup of the Yugoslav federation. In the 1990s, they started in Bosnia as an entry point, but later they penetrated into different parts of the region as well. Radical Islamists started growing roots in the Balkans. Over the past few years, radical Islamists have applied significant pressure on Muslim communities in the Western Balkan countries. As was the case in Bosnia, isolated areas have fallen under the control of radical Islamists. The village of Gorna Maoca in Bosnia is one of the examples where radical Islamists established full control over the village. The last police action, early 2010, in the village of Gorna Maoca, was an attempt by the Bosnian government to reestablished control over the village.<sup>1</sup> Having areas under control of radical Islamists is a significant challenge to the security environment in the Western Balkans. It is essential to research factors that contribute to the creation of favorable conditions in the Western Balkans for the concentration of radical Islamists.

The previous chapter provided an overview of the background of my research thesis. This chapter will review and discuss the existing professional writing and publications referring to the factors that create favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. The focus is on the key literature of my research organized into two parts. The first part will review and discuss writing from authors who wrote books on radical Islamists in relation with Europe and the Balkans. The second part will offer an overview of the reports that are examining the influence of the radical Islamists in

relation to Europe and the Balkans. This chapter also will present the patterns and the gaps of current information and portray a base for new study.

Writing about a contemporary issue is very challenging and often is a target for many critiques. Radical Islamists pose a transnational threat that still emerging. The authors present their own views, opinions and assessments on the influence of the radical Islamists that is shaped by their own biases. The opinions and assessments vary depending on the author's professional background, region of origin, and ideological believes. This represents a serious challenge for my further analysis. Time is the only measurement that will show whether their opinions and assessment were valid or not.

### Books

Yunas Samad and Kasuri Sen, editors of the book *Islam in the European Union*,<sup>2</sup> gives the perceptions of Muslims in Europe, referring mainly to indigenous British Muslims and to Muslims in France, Spain and the Netherlands. After the London and Madrid bombings increased the focus on European Muslims, hostility towards policies of multiculturalism gained an impetus. The essays in the book suggest that deprivation and alienation, and socio-economic development are the key factors in growing violence and acts of terrorism. The book starts by examining the growth of Muslim populations in Europe. Muslims began to come to Europe as temporary immigrants and workers. Later they became economic migrants. Despite the economic turbulence in Europe, Muslims continue to migrate to reunite with the families. The Muslims have been perceived as immigrants from third world countries. Since their religion is diametrically opposite to European Christianity, Muslims succeeded in maintaining their religious tradition without been integrated into the European societies. The growing number of Muslims increased

the need for explicit political participation. These changes of the Muslim population in Europe were in line with the growth of political Islam in the Muslim world. Further, the book examines why Muslims were perceived as fundamentalists, especially after 11 September 2001 and how the growth of European identity influences the gap between the cultures. The editors include essays about Islamophobia as a phenomena that arose after the cold war. The editors believed that the media perceived Muslim identity as the globalization of Islamic fundamentalism. They continue to examine the reasons for growing racism, xenophobia and most recent Islamophobia as a negative Muslim stereotype that justifies their oppression and violence at multiple levels. Further, the editors continue with examining the issue of discrimination within the European countries. They look at Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands as case studies and compare their approaches to minimize the discrimination of Muslims within their societies. This book gives an overview of the expansion of Muslims in Europe and how cultural and religious differences widen the gap between Muslims and Europeans.

The author of the book, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qaida, and the rise of global Jihad*,<sup>3</sup> John Schindler examines the Afghanistan invasion and the Bosnian conflict from the perspective of its role in the evolution of Al-Qaida's development. While he is examining how Al-Qaida is exploiting both Afghanistan and especially the Bosnian conflict to expand their influence in Europe, the author gives an evaluation of US foreign policy and its influence on the Bosnian conflict and the mujahidin fighters. Furthermore, he examines the media influence and the birth of the "CNN factor." He believes that the media have played a key role in shaping the foreign policy and temporarily give freedom

of operation for the mujahidin in Bosnia. The author's experience as an intelligence analyst gives him the freedom to argue that many others who are working on the same issue are talking of theories of terrorism, but no one is looking at modus operandi and case studies analysis.

In the book *Islamic terror and the Balkans*,<sup>4</sup> Shaul Shay describes how radical Islamists and Al-Qaida established themselves in the Balkans over the past decade. In addition, he provides some insights into the processes that caused the Balkans to become an important area for radical Islamists and the threats they pose to Europe. He strongly believes that the Bosnian conflict played key a role in attracting radical Islamists to the Balkans. According to the same model as in Afghanistan, radical Islamists were focused on sending experienced mujahidin fighters to Bosnia. The author points out that the Bosnian government's decision to welcome mujahidin fighters and grant them passports was the starting point for the Islamists to establish strong roots in Bosnian society. Al-Qaida was exploiting the Bosnian government's acceptance of mujahedin fighters and they started to expand on European soil. Later under strong pressure from the international community, the Bosnian government had to expel foreign fighters that had been granted passports. However, the author said that the Bosnian government is still unable to provide a safe and secure environment; by this Bosnia is becoming a favorable place for radical Islamists mainly for logistics, reorganization and safe heaven. The author believes that there is no immediate threat to the Balkans from terrorists' acts, but radical Islamists use it as rear area for further operations.

*Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe* is a book in which the author Evan Kohlmann examines the radical Islamists and Al-Qaida settlements in the Balkans and their

organizational expansion into Western Europe. His book gives us a clear picture of the interconnection of radical Islamists in the Balkans and Al-Qaida with other Islamist organizations. He started his research with the question: —“All the places that Al-Qaida has extended its influence to, why study Bosnia so critically?”<sup>5</sup> The findings consider multiple interrelated factors. Everything started with the deployment of large numbers of Arab jihadi fighters in Bosnia in the mid 1990s; the estimate is about 5,000 fighters were sent, who were loyal to Afghanistan leadership.<sup>6</sup> Second, this colossal and important migration of Arab-Afghans to Bosnia took place at an early stage of the Al-Qaida movement, meaning that the experience had long-lasting effects both practically and ideologically on the terrorist group.<sup>7</sup> Third, Bosnia’s geographic position, directly between Western Europe and the Middle East, makes it an ideal jumping-off point for organizational expansion of the movement into Western Europe (Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom).<sup>8</sup> Radical Islamists and Al-Qaida exploited these conditions to consolidate combat military experience from Afghanistan and enthusiastic Islamists from Western Europe. This was a turning point for the future jihad. This event was unique in the history of Al-Qaida, which created unlimited opportunities for further expansion and augmentation.<sup>9</sup> While Al-Qaida was shaping their new future of jihad for long-term effects, Western Europe and the US remained blind to the new emerging threat.

Publications about the Balkans were focused on the conflict in Bosnia and how it contributed to spreading the radical Islamists’ influence beyond the Middle East. They came up with almost the same conclusion that the Bosnian conflict was the entry point of radical Islamists through many organizations, mainly Al-Qaida to European soil.

However, they do not examine the period after the Bosnian conflict. Their studies are a good starting point to understand how radical Islamists established themselves in the Western Balkans. However, knowing the radical Islamists have established themselves in the Western Balkans, further study is needed to examine activities up to today.

### Reports

The study of the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia named *Discrimination and Islamophobia*,<sup>10</sup> published in 2006 was an attempt to research the reasons for and percentage of discrimination and Islamophobia in ten EU member states. The study involved interviews with members of the Muslim population in ten EU countries. The report's general conclusion was that the Muslim population in the EU was put under the general suspicion of terrorism especially after 9/11. The report consists of two parts. The first part of the report provides background information about Muslims and their social life, especially in areas of employment, education and housing. The second part contains an inclusive summary of the accessible information and data about symptoms of Islamophobia in all EU Member States. Further, the report identifies and examines problem areas and gaps as a reason of increasing the differences between cultures. The report also gives an overview of the existing government and civil society initiatives to target Muslims in order to increase their interaction with the rest of society. At the end, the report gives an overview and assessment of policy actions by EU member state governments and the European institutions to combat Islamophobia and to foster integration and community cohesion.

The study of the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, named *Voice from Members of Muslim Communities in the European Union*,<sup>11</sup> conducted in



2006 to be read in conjunction with the previous report in order to have in-depth overview of the issue. This study was based on 58 in-depth interviews with members of Muslim communities in ten EU countries with significant Muslim populations. Since the study was conducted by interview, it presents the perceptions and individual experiences of European Muslims. The report is meant to serve as an overview of the opinions, feelings, fears, frustrations and the optimism and vision of the future that European Muslims in the EU have. The report provides a good base on which to identify the potential issues of discrimination and Islamophobia.

These two reports give a critical overview of the position, situation and relationship between institutions of the countries of European Union and the Muslim communities. However, the opinions and assessments are interpretations of the findings of the research.

The report of the Western Balkan Policy Review 2010,<sup>12</sup> conducted in 2010 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is a study of the security situation in the Western Balkans that will assist the policy makers of Western countries to understand the Western Balkans' challenges and to assist in addressing them. This report, edited by Janusz Bugajski, who gives a detailed overview of the politico-security situation of the Western Balkans in relationship with the EU. He looks at each of the Western Balkan countries and its political and security challenges. It also gives an overview of the EU policy towards each of these countries. This report identifies certain political, economic and security factors that contribute to creating a favorable environment for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. However, these factors consist of variables that change

over time and under certain conditions. The assessment and opinions can serve for further analysis in comparison with the other studies and findings.

The report of the International Crisis Group on Understanding Islamism,<sup>13</sup> published in 2005, gives a breakdown of the Islamists' ideology and identifies the modus operandi of Islamists. It points out three levels that are essential to understand in order to produce effective countermeasures to combat the emerging threat. The first one is political Islam, its goals and ideology. The second one is missionary, which is focused on preserving the Muslim identity. The third one is jihad, a violent struggle that consists of three variants: internal combat against Muslim regimes, irredentist fighting to redeem land ruled by non-Muslims and global fighting against the West. This study of Islamism overcomes the attempts to generalize the threat from radical Islamists and to look at the roots of the threat. Detailed knowledge of the threat in conjunction with the political and economic factors and security conditions will assist in identifying the favorable conditions for concentration of radical Islamists in the Western Balkans are.

### Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has discussed key literature, which examines the conditions that favor radical Islamists' emergence as a significant threat in the Western Balkans. This literature covers the period until 2005. In addition, I did not find any books, journals or independent authors who write about the influence of radical Islamists in the Balkans from the period of 2005 until today. In my data collection, I did not find any authors from the Western Balkans that are doing research on this issue or at least there is none published yet. It appears that there is an absence of scholarly research and analysis of events beyond 2001. The literature gives the understanding of the danger and

establishment of radical Islamists, but it is essential to examine the period from 2001 until today in order to understand radical Islamists' activities and the level of threat they are posing today. However, despite the cultural stereotypes and ethnical dispute pressure, detailed study is required in order to counter the emerging threat that will have long-term effects on the already fragile security environment within the Western Balkan countries.

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<sup>1</sup>B92.net, "Bosnia: Police raid Wahhabi village," February 2, 2010, [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=02&nav\\_id=64933](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=02&nav_id=64933) (accessed December 15, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Yunas Samad and Kasturi Sen, *Islam in the European Union: Transnationalism, Youth and War on Terror* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>John Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa'ida, and the rise of the global jihad* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Shay Shaul, *Islamic Terror and the Balkans* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publisher, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Evan Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian network* (Gordonsville, VA: Berg, 2004).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., xii.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, "Muslims in European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia," 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18\\_12\\_06fulleureport.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_12_06fulleureport.pdf) (accessed March 25, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Tufyal Choudhury, Mohammed Aziz, Duaa Izzidien, Intissar Khreeji, and Dilwar Hussain, "Perceptions of discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from members of Islamic Communities in the European Union," European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18\\_12\\_06perceptioneu.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/18_12_06perceptioneu.pdf) (accessed March 25, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>Janusz Bugajski, *The Western Balkan policy review 2010*, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100917\\_Bugajski\\_WesternBalkans\\_WEB.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100917_Bugajski_WesternBalkans_WEB.pdf) (accessed February 16, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>International Crisis Group, "Understanding of Islamism," (March 2005): 37, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Understanding%20Islamism.ashx> (accessed March 15, 2011).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The Balkans is a very specific area and perhaps the most fragile region in Europe. Geographically it is a part of Europe, but it seems like politically it is not, at least not yet. At the same time, Europe is putting a lot of effort into assisting the Western Balkan countries to transform into democratic states compatible to the European Union family. The Western Balkan countries are facing many challenges. A long-lasting political transformation, which has lasted for more than 15 years and is backed by EU pressure, has not produced significant results. Slow economic development, internal challenges of overcoming nationalistic and ethnic disputes, and almost 20 years of influence by radical Islamists have started showing results. As the EU processes started, paradoxically, the influence from European Islamists also began growing. Since all of these factors contribute to the creation of a complex security environment, radical Islamists are exploiting every bit of it. Their ideology and goals are not constrained by time. They are very aware that the best result will come in the long term. They started to lay their footprints in the 1990s, and today they represent a competitive player among the other actors in the security environment.

The primary research question of this thesis is a product of contemporary development in the Western Balkans: Are the Western Balkans becoming a European sanctuary for Islamists? In answering this question, it is necessary to understand the threat from radical Islamists to the security environment in the Western Balkans and its impact on European security. In chapter two, the main literature that provides key insights and background about the factors that favor radical Islamists in the Western

Balkans are listed. Chapter three will explain how these sources were used in the development of the hypothesis that addresses how the radical Islamists concentrate in the Western Balkans and make it a sanctuary and base for further operations.

### Textual Analysis

The first step in the methodological approach of this study is a rigorous examination of source material to identify and filter out biased data. This topic is a contemporary issue for many countries. Its sensitivity is subject to much criticism from different perceptions of who the radical Islamists are and what they are doing. Available data from the resources listed in chapter two challenge the process of analysis. The challenge comes from the data presented by the authors, the sources and credibility of which, the authors do not always list. Some authors present information from a third party as relevant to their point of view, without any citation or further explanation. As an illustration, one of the authors presents the following information obtained from a journalist: “German and Austrian intelligence were running large amounts of weapons to the Bosnians through private company owned by an Austrian named Dieter Hoffman.”<sup>1</sup> He accepts such information as the truth, without considering the source’s credibility. Other authors in their analysis of the information intrinsically inject a bias reflecting cultural and religious differences or misconception in their assessments, although apparently unintentionally. Further, I continue to compare the information collected from different sources. This method allows me to minimize misconceptions in my analysis. I start my analysis by recognizing biased information. Part of this analysis consists of researching the backgrounds of the authors through open sources. This allows me to

understand who they are, where they come from, and to some level, understand their views of the contemporary issues of radical Islamists and the Balkan region.

The analysis will be a challenge because of the lack of unbiased qualitative and quantitative analysis from Balkan authors. It appears that the regional perception of this contemporary issue is missing. Many factors contribute to discouraging Balkan experts from writing about the influence of radical Islamists in the Balkans. One of the many reasons is the fragility of the multiethnic society and the perception that any attempt to offer opinions or simply mention the Islamic religion by non-Muslims might recreate ethnic tensions. Writers from the Western Balkans, and the author is no exception, have some prejudices. However, in researching to answer the thesis question, the author strives to avoid being influenced by these prejudices and to present less biased research about the threat of radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. In so doing, it is the author's intent that the thesis will serve as ground for further research on the topic.

To assess the validity of the hypothesis, the author collected information from the macro level, Europe as a whole, to the micro level, the events in the Western Balkan countries. The actors, time, actions, possible goals, and geographic area are the elements of the analysis. Europe, the Western Balkan countries and radical Islamists are the key actors of the analysis. Each of them with their own influence of political, economical and cultural powers and interests produces factors in the Western Balkans that radical Islamists exploit for their own interest. Time is a factor that each of the actors interprets differently. The outcomes of their actions depend on the individual understanding of time. Actions taken are results of their goals and interests in the Western Balkans.

The analysis of the data proceeds through three steps. First, the study examines Europe as a whole, identifying those factors that enable the spread of Islam in Western Europe and those that define the relationship between Western Europe and the Western Balkans. Second, the study considers factors in the Western Balkans that set the conditions for radical Islamists' activities and the lengthy road the countries of the Western Balkans face as they strive for integration with Western Europe. Third, the study analyzes Muslims in the Western Balkans and Western Europe, along with the spread of radical Islam in Europe.

The analysis starts with the European influence and policy and their interconnection with the Balkans and radical Islamists. It is important to analyze how Europe is contributing to creating the factors that favor radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. The analysis is based on perspectives about the European influence on the Western Balkans. The idea of Europe without borders will address the opportunities of freedom of movement throughout the European continent. I will examine the meaning of open European borders in relation to the goals and interests of the radical Islamists.

The most important are factors that contribute to the radicalization of Muslims in Europe. I identify the reasons for an increased Muslim population in Europe from the 1970s until 2010. As soon as Muslim immigrants established themselves in Europe, their position in society and their acceptance by European institutions defined their further interactions with the European nations' societies. The correspondence of these two elements will show how Europe and European Muslims are creating the conditions the radical Islamists can exploit for their cause. Because of the geopolitical interconnectedness between Europe and the Western Balkans, identification of the



reasons why Europe did not fully integrate the Western Balkans into the EU and why they still represent a drain for European financial and governmental efforts is important. In addition, the policy of the EU toward the Western Balkan countries plays a significant role. This comparison will show how Western Europe and the Western Balkan countries, in pursuing their interests, unintentionally are creating the conditions that favor radical Islamists.

The Western Balkans is a very complex environment, rich with a diversity of religions, cultures and ethnicities. It is a southern center for all economic and road communication to and from Europe. Its geopolitical position in Europe makes the Balkans vulnerable to different ideologies and fertile ground for rising nationalism and ethnic disputes. I found it essential to examine how the rise of nationalism during the 1990s contributed to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. The analysis continues with the expansion of the radical Islamists and how and why they focus on the Western Balkans. The events associated with the Western Balkans are like a domino effect, for example, the Kosovo crisis contributed to the factors that radical Islamists are exploiting. Since the Yugoslav federation broke up in 1992, the Western Balkan countries have been in a transition process towards EU integration. Yet by 2010, none of the Western Balkan countries had become a member of the EU. The transformation process is still ongoing. I consider it extremely important to examine how the long-lasting transformation process also contributes to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists.

The analysis of the Balkan Muslims is based on culture, way of life, and shared history with the non-Muslim population. It is essential to examine the characteristics of

the Balkan Muslims and what makes them different from the European Muslims, if for no other reason than to show to what level radical Islamists can spread their ideology between the Balkan Muslims in the contemporary environment. Finally, an examination of the strengths of radical Islamist ideology will show to what extent the Islamists are successful in spreading their influence in the Western Balkans.

Chapter four will provide the qualitative analysis of events in Europe and the Western Balkans that have led to the creation of factors that favor radical Islamists. In addition to testing the hypothesis' validity, this analysis examines the thesis's sub-questions: (1) How does the European influence contribute to the creation of the factors that favor radical Islamists? (2) How do the Western Balkan countries contribute to creation of the factors that favor radical Islamists? and (3) What is the role of the Balkan Muslims in spreading the radical Islamists ideology.

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<sup>1</sup>Deliso Christopher, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate* (New York: Praeger Security International, 2007), 7.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

Radical Islamists in the Balkans are not trying to conceal their presence and influence. Events in the Western Balkans in 2010 and 2011 illustrate the continued activism of Islamists. For example, in Macedonia, the Chief Mufti of the Islamic community Suleyman Rexhepi claimed in March 2011 that Wahhabis controlled four mosques in the capital Skopje.<sup>1</sup> In May 2010, in the Isa-Bay mosque, also in the capital Skopje, the followers of Wahhabi physically attacked and dislodged the Imam Ibrahim Shabani.<sup>2</sup> In Serbia's, Sangjak region, in the city of Novi Pazar, Imam Muamer Zukorlic was elected as the new mufti of the National Council of Bosniaks in 2010. The government of Serbia tried to characterize this election as invalid, but Imam Zukorlic, using strong nationalistic rhetoric, has threatened armed conflict if the government continued to oppose the election. Zukorlic moved further and announced the establishment of parallel institutions to those of the Serbian government in the Sangjak region, as a first step to regional autonomy.<sup>3</sup> During 2010, in Kosovo, in the village of Merine, Imam Xhemal (Kastriot) Duka gave 20 euros cash to people to join the Wahhabis. He was the Imam in the local mosque and resisted recognizing the official Islamic Community of Kosovo.<sup>4</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina in late 2010, the key leadership from all three ethnic communities increased their nationalistic rhetoric before elections.<sup>5</sup> This just boosts the gap between ethnicities instead of building the multiethnic state. These events point to a continuing influence of Islam that challenges state institutions and nationalism. The combination of these two phenomena prepares fertile ground in which radical Islam can flourish.

The voice of Islamists is stronger. They have started to show their actions and the goals they want to achieve. Countering the threat in this complex security environment is extremely sensitive. Analyzing the second and third order effects of official actions is as important as taking the actions. The Western Balkan countries need to have a clear understanding of the security environment in order to make the right decisions to counter the emerging threat as well as to minimize the consequences from the second and third order effects. This thesis will provide linkages between Europe, the Western Balkans and Balkans Muslims and how their collective influence contributes to the creation of the favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans.

There is an interconnection between Europeans, Western Balkans and radical Islamists interests, political and economic powers, strategic decision making and geographical spaces. Therefore, the analysis is divided into three parts: influence from Europe, the Western Balkan countries' influence through their actions (or lack thereof), and Balkan Muslims as a key target for radical Islamists' influence. The analysis will address the mutual interconnection between Europe, the Western Balkans and radical Islamists in order to determine the factors that favor radical Islamists in the Western Balkans.

### European Factors

An examination of the European influence is essential because of the geopolitical interconnection with the Western Balkans. The breakdown of European borders for free travel makes Europe vulnerable. The Schengen zone allows free travel between European countries, which challenges the security of each the nations. Discrimination against European Muslims creates conditions for alienation of the Muslims from European

societies, even though European governments expect Muslims to integrate into societies. What Europeans view as integration of their Muslim populations, European Muslims perceive as attempts at assimilation. This difference will deepen the gap between the ethnicities. Even though, the Balkans is geographically part of the European continent, geopolitically has been a stepchild. The legacy of communism and a long history of ethnic disputes contribute to the Balkans' relative separation from European integrity. However, Europe has to deal with the consequences from the neighboring Balkans' disturbances.

#### Factors that contribute to radicalization of the Muslims in Europe

In the recent history, Western Europe has been a region without Muslim countries or a significant Muslim population. Christianity is the largest religion in Europe. The Balkans is the only region with a large number of Muslim residents, due to the occupation by Ottoman Empire, which ended at the end of the First World War. Today, Islam is the second largest religion in Europe.<sup>6</sup> The main reason for this transformation is the migration process that Europe welcomed.

After the Second World War, Europe began a highly dynamic period of industrial development and modernization. This process exposed the need for cheap labor. In order to obtain this labor, Europe had an open door policy for workers. Slowly, Europe became a hub for the influx of immigrants searching for better life and economic prosperity. This European open door policy for workers was the main inspiration for most of the Muslim immigration. During the mid-1970s, a large number of Muslim immigrants arrived in Europe as a labor force. The trend of migration of Muslims to Europe continued during

the mid-1980s, but not so much a labor force as has been the case earlier. From the 1980s on the Muslim immigrants were predominantly political refugees.<sup>7</sup>

European countries allowed Muslim immigrants who were seeking work to come to Europe to exploit the need for a labor force. Different European countries have had different internal policies about how to deal with the immigrants. France has been the most desirable destination for Muslim immigrants from Northern Africa because of the French colonial heritage. In the early 1950s, most of the immigrants were from the former colonies.<sup>8</sup> France eventually reached the point where the imposition of immigration controls became necessary. The goal of the policy was to return one million immigrants to their homelands. However, the policy failed because of the huge number of clandestine immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Even though French immigration policy is based on equality of background and the expectation that the immigrants would respect the French nation, it seems that both the immigrants and the French push the limits of the policy.<sup>10</sup>

Germany, home to 3.5 million Muslims, many of which do not have German citizenship, is second to France in terms of the number of Muslim immigrants.<sup>11</sup> The rapid development and modernization of the German economy, along with the division of the country until 1990, created the need for the steady influx of cheap labor, mainly from Turkey, but also from other Muslim countries like Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>12</sup> As Germany rapidly developed into a strong and economically prosperous country, it continued to attract immigrant workers, as well as refugees from Turkey, Iran and other Arab countries. Many political refugees from former Yugoslavia, Palestine and Afghanistan also contributed to the Muslim population of Germany, which has had the highest rate of immigration in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Until the 1970s, the United Kingdom (UK) had an unrestricted immigration policy for citizens of the British colonies and member countries of the Commonwealth.<sup>14</sup> During the nineteenth century, many Muslim immigrants arrived in the port cities of Liverpool, London and Working.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter, the immigration was restricted to family reunification and asylum migration.<sup>16</sup>

The Netherlands has also become a home for immigrants from the former colonial territories. The scale of the immigrant flow remains significantly smaller than what France and the UK has experienced. In the last decades, a significant number of asylum seekers from Iraq, Iran, and especially during the 1990s, Somalia and Afghanistan have come to the Netherlands because of the crises in each of the countries.<sup>17</sup>

Muslim immigration to Belgium has been similar to the Netherlands and Germany. –However, Belgium remains the one of the most liberal countries in Europe as far as policies on family reunification are concerned.”<sup>18</sup> This liberal attitude is becoming paradoxical to security. Governments like Belgium’s are respecting democratic and human values, while at the same time creating conditions in which could give radical Islamists the freedom to spread their ideology.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, European countries’ internal and foreign policies allowed many Muslim immigrants to arrive in Europe. The main reason was to exploit low cost of immigrant labor.<sup>19</sup> Most of the immigrants never left Europe, because the new environment offered a better life. However, the European environment is very different from the environment the Muslim immigrants were coming from, because of basic differences in culture, socio-economic and political status and religion. When exposed to the unknowns of new environment, it is in human nature to seek help from one’s fellow

countrymen. It helps to fulfill the human need for belonging to a group, the group of countrymen, where all share language, culture, tradition, religion and nationality. Muslim immigrants to Europe came from diverse social, political and cultural backgrounds. They have found it hard to re-create a representation of the identity and ethnicity they knew in their homelands. This gap between the immigrants' backgrounds and the environment in the country to which they migrated creates political pressure on Muslim communities and leads people to turn back to religious-led activities as the only form of civil rights they can defend.<sup>20</sup> Cultural values are very different. Today, the Muslims in Europe are living the second and third generation. These generations are living the cultures and traditions from their countries of origin, so integration into the new society is a very slow process, which depends on the degree of differences between the cultures. Since the European and Muslim cultures are so different, the process of integration is a very slow one. As it to compound the effects of the challenges to integration brought on by cultural differences, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in the United States of September 11, 2001, the killing of Dutch film maker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam, the Madrid (2004) and London (2005) bombings, as well as failed terrorists attacks in Germany, Denmark, and the UK in 2006, 706 individuals suspected of Islamist terrorism were arrested.<sup>21</sup> As a second order effect, discrimination against Muslims in Europe rapidly increased, although many times unintentionally.

The challenge of the integration of European Muslims into European societies has become urgent, due to the involvement of Muslim immigrants in terrorist attacks on European soil.<sup>22</sup> European policy makers are heavily engaged in addressing the issue of discrimination against Muslims in Europe.<sup>23</sup> The EU, however, does not have the



capability or credibility to solve this issue as an institution. The resolution of this problem is the responsibility of individual EU Member states. Since the Muslims come from different backgrounds, the discrimination varies between different Muslim groups. Some Muslims experience discrimination based on nationality, refugee or immigration status and some based on color, race or religion. In 2009, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted a survey to examine the discrimination issue. The *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey* clearly demonstrated that discrimination against Muslims in Europe exists and is one of the factors that contributes to the alienation and radicalization of Muslims in Europe. Key findings of the survey point out that on average one in three Muslims stated that they had experienced discrimination, while 79 percent of respondents did not report their experience of discrimination because they felt that ~~nothing~~ would happen or change.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, about 30 percent of the discrimination incidents occurred when Muslims were looking for work or at work, while 14 percent took place in restaurants, bars, or in dealings with property owners.<sup>25</sup> The European Center on Racism and Xenophobia, in research conducted in 2006, found that nearly one third of Muslim respondents stated that they experienced discrimination through being refused access to jobs, missing promotions, or being harassed at work and in commercial transactions, either through denial of access to housing, credit or loans.<sup>26</sup>

Both Europeans and Muslims are experiencing changes in beliefs and perceptions about the other culture. These experiences can lead to prejudices that divide the two groups. Two factors influence the Western societies’ tendency to generalize Muslims as a threat: years of long effort at building the European identity and terrorist acts committed

by a small group of radical Islamists on European soil. European pride and years of effort of building European identity mitigate against granting to any other culture equal treatment and benefits. What Europeans view as a project of the integration of European Muslims into the societies, the European Muslims simultaneously interpret as assimilation.<sup>27</sup> These differences in perception of integration (a positive perception) and assimilation (a negative perception) help create conditions in which radical Islamists can gain influence.

Europe is characterized by cultural, socio-economic, political, racial, ethnic, religious, and gender diversity. Muslim residents, legal and illegal immigrants alike have more than one these characteristics that can lead to discrimination in Europe. What is important is how they interpret their discrimination experience. Muslims in Europe originate from different ethnicities, nationalities, race and regions. However, they all share a religion. Unable (or unwilling) to adopt and integrate into the European societies, Muslims tend to organize and identify themselves by religion. Lacking education in the European states, working low-income jobs and sensing a hostile environment, many Muslims may be subject to “group thinking.”

The EU, although limited in its ability to address the problem itself, is trying to solve the issue of discrimination on two levels: as the EU as an institution and at the member state level. The EU is addressing discrimination with Article 13 of the European Community Treaty.<sup>28</sup> A weakness is that the legal Framework Directive, which covers discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, does not cover key areas where Muslims continue to experience discrimination, including housing, education, access to

goods and services, and the actions of public officials particularly, police and immigration officials.”<sup>29</sup>

It appears that effective enforcement of this Article 13 requires a clear vision and consensus around what religious equality for Muslims looks and feels like.<sup>30</sup> In the absence of such a clear vision or consensus, however, member states are taking separate measures according to what they believe are proper solutions for their countries to protect their own national interests. In 2008, for example, the British government was unsuccessful in countering the influence of radical Islamists and Islamic separatism in Leicester.<sup>31</sup> Muslims demand political power within the Leicester city council, as well as the freedom to wear their religious dress at work and to have halal food in the city hospitals and own faith-based schools.<sup>32</sup> In this case, radical Islamists may have been successfully exploiting conditions that are created by the differences between the two cultures.

#### The Balkans as an integral part of Europe

The Balkans region was always the stepchild of the Europe. The Balkans has remained outside of any process of alliance or integration into Western Europe. The Ottoman occupation marked the boundaries between Europe and the Balkans. During the Cold War, the Balkans region was not part of the development of the European Community, because communist regimes governed most of the countries in the region. The geopolitical position of Greece was of utmost importance, and it became the first battleground in the fight against communism. Tito’s foreign policy of Yugoslavia turned the Western Balkans towards non-aligned nations, instead of toward Europe and the US. European integration at that point was not even a theoretical option.

After the creation of the EU and NATO, the Western European countries marked the boundaries of the West with the rest of the European countries and the rest of the world.<sup>33</sup> This separation was the common ground for their values, which exist today. The geopolitical map of Europe has three entities: Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Western European countries grew as a base and driving force for what today are the EU and NATO. Eastern European countries were under Soviet influence. The Western Balkans, especially the former Yugoslavia, was under strong communist influence. Tito's politics aimed to balance between West and East. The foreign policy of balancing just deepened the gap between the EU and Western Balkans. From the other side, the Soviets were trying to strengthen their influence.

During the 1990s, the EU was focusing on solving the issue of the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. The EU was heavily involved in this process. However, the EU soon realized that this was a huge ~~bite~~ "bite to swallow." Lacking military capability, the EU was forced to seek assistance from the US, which made them the leading nation for peacekeeping and nation building operations in the Balkans. After September 11, 2001, the Balkans disappeared from the priority list of geopolitically important regions for the EU and the US. The new focus was Afghanistan, and soon thereafter Iraq, which remain priorities today. Looking at contemporary events in the Balkans it seems that is the region remains an unfinished project. Many ongoing transition processes make the Western Balkan an unfinished project. The US has the luxury of de-emphasizing the region because the Western Balkans does not directly influence or threaten US national interests. However, the EU does not have this comfort.

In the past two decades, the Western Balkans have consumed billions of dollars and exhausted government and regional the EU initiatives and effort.

### Western Balkan policy

The European policy towards the Western Balkans is very clear: the Western Balkans region needs to be a part of the EU. In June 2003, at the Thessaloniki European Council, the EU characterized all the Western Balkans states as potential future members of the EU. Whereas Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro have already been granted the status of candidate countries, the others remain potential candidates.<sup>34</sup> However, the EU has not set certain times in the near future for accession by Western Balkans countries, because of the different stages of transformation for each country and the financial crises that the EU has been trying to recover from. Two issues have challenged the EU Western Balkans policy: the process of implementation of reforms by the Western Balkans countries and the lessons learned from the last round of EU enlargement.

The Western Balkans countries are in different stages in the process of EU integration. Croatia will likely get into the European Union first.<sup>35</sup> Macedonia and Montenegro are candidate countries, and Serbia signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement in April 2008.<sup>36</sup> For the rest of the countries, the EU is pressuring leaders to resolve issues left over from the wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration of the 1990s, as a sine qua non for progress towards accession.<sup>37</sup> Even though the countries are in different stages of transformation, there remain some common challenges that for the last 15 years the Western Balkans countries have not see able to overcome. The Western Balkans countries are still struggling to meet the first two of the three basic Copenhagen Criteria.<sup>38</sup> As a part of the political reforms, stability of the institutions that guarantee

democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the respect for and protection of the minorities remain an issue.<sup>39</sup>

Over the last two decades, the leadership in the Western Balkans countries has had roots in the previous communist regimes. Leadership changes in most of the Western Balkans countries have brought to power the second echelon of politicians from the former communist regimes. Even though all of them are working toward EU integration, after ten years they have not achieved much success. The existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU<sup>40</sup> still remain beyond the reach of the political leadership of the Western Balkans countries. The economical prosperity of the Western Balkans countries is very closely tied to and dependent on close cooperation between the countries because of the economic policy of the former Yugoslavia. The nationalist and ethnic disputes that arose with the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation are the obstacles that affected the economical prosperity of the Western Balkans countries.

The inculcation of a European identity to make conflict inconceivable is a goal which many European states have already attained.<sup>41</sup> It seems that the EU policy toward the Western Balkans is based on inculcation of the same idea. The Western Balkans, however, is a post-communist; in-transition and post-conflict region that represents a hub for corruption, organized crime and national and ethnic disputes.<sup>42</sup> This condition represents a potential threat at the doorstep of the EU. The only way to minimize the threat from the Western Balkans to the EU is to integrate the Western Balkans into the European family and strengthen the latent influence of the requirements of the EU *acquis communautaire*. In this process of EU integration, it appears that the EU is more focused

on political reforms. Even though political reforms are the basis for building democratic society, the Western Balkans countries must at the same time manage economic reforms to overcome many remnants of the former system. This process of transformation of the Western Balkan countries has lasted more than 15 years.

### Idea of Europe without borders

When we use the term Europe, it sounds like a single country. The reality is that Europe is a region, consisting of different nations. Each of the nations has its own national interests that keep it as a part of the larger European family. —The European Union was designed to create a European identity while retaining the nation-state. The problem was not in the principle, as it is possible for people to have multiple identities.”<sup>43</sup> The EU has almost all the elements of a state: parliament, Council of Ministers, European Council, Commission, Court of Justice, policies, issues, foreign relations (to some degree), elections and laws. Besides, all of these institutions and the influence that the European Union exerts in the world, the EU still cannot provide some essential elements of governance to its member states: it does not have police to provide security, does not have an army for defense, or healthcare and social welfare to improve the quality of life. The EU, lacking these capacities, discharges these responsibilities through the member states. Each of the nations has a different internal and foreign policy. Each member state is responsible for its own future, and all of them are working towards building the European identity. To finalize the effort of creation of the European identity, a Europe without borders was necessary. Even though all European states accepted the European identity and Europe without borders, self-identification by nationality always comes first.

Working toward a Europe without borders gave the Western Europeans the ability virtually to diminish international borders. Eastern European countries were able to join the Schengen zone, as the regime of relaxed border controls is known, as they became EU member states. In January 2010 the EU also granted Schengen visa liberalization to Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Becoming a member of the Schengen zone has been a huge advantage for Macedonia, for example, in supporting the process of transformation and becoming a full member state of the EU. The EU decided to grant Schengen visa liberalization to Macedonia when it became a candidate state for EU membership.<sup>44</sup> The EU also granted visa liberalization to Serbia and Montenegro in support of transformation processes in those Western Balkans countries. Visa liberalization opens the EU door to Western Balkan countries that are still in transition, ethnically fragile and economically unstable. As soon as the visa liberalization was granted, many asylum-seekers started traveling to Europe. In the case of Macedonia, many of the asylum-seeking people came from the Albanian and Roma ethnicities from the Lipkovo region of northern Macedonia.<sup>45</sup>

Along with political support to Western Balkans countries, visa liberalization carries many disadvantages that will challenge EU security. The Western Balkan countries have become transit countries to the EU for illegal migrants, human trafficking, drugs, and counterfeit Euros.<sup>46</sup> Visa liberalization increases the opportunities for illicit activities from the Western Balkans countries. In Macedonia, several travel agencies were under investigation of participating in the illegal transportation of asylum-seekers from Macedonia and Serbia to EU member countries.<sup>47</sup> Free travel into the European countries is a huge advantage that will help in many spheres of cooperation, development



and prosperity. It is also a challenge to the security of the European states. A common security initiative and treaties are steps to overcome some of the challenges. However, the question of effectiveness remains because different countries have different national priorities. A shortage of capacity for building police forces that will be capable of providing security throughout European states may allow freedom of movement and the operations of different terrorist and organized crime organizations and non-state actors.

### The Western Balkans factors

It is essential to examine how the Western Balkans countries contribute to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists. The Western Balkans is a very turbulent region. Rising nationalism resulted in armed conflict that significantly affected the socio-economical development of the Western Balkans which is still recovering from the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Radical Islamists exploited these conditions to continue their fight to protect the Muslims in the Western Balkans, for instance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They successfully exploited armed conflicts to establish themselves in the Balkan region. The tradition of conflict continued with the actions of Milosevic regime and subsequent intervention of NATO in Kosovo.

The complex geopolitical environment makes the Balkans a region where the world powers have frequently clashed. Traditional rivals Europe, Russia and Turkey even today seek influence in the Balkans in pursuit of the own interests. Today, in the Balkans, the radical Islamists' voice is becoming stronger. They are becoming the new player in an already complex environment. They do not hide their efforts to take control over the Muslims in the Balkans, especially in the Western Balkans countries. The Balkans states have the highest rates of Muslim resident population in Europe. The approximate Muslim

populations in the Western Balkans countries vary. In Macedonia, Muslims are about 33.3 percent;<sup>48</sup> Serbia 3.2 percent;<sup>49</sup> Kosovo 92 percent;<sup>50</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina 40 percent;<sup>51</sup> Albania 70 percent;<sup>52</sup> and Croatia 1.3 percent.<sup>53</sup> Muslims have been a part of the complex history of conflicts and tension between the Balkans nations.

Events of the past 15 years, which will be described below, have demonstrated that the Balkans is a major threat to security and stability in Europe. While the Western Balkan nations were trying to overcome their historically unsettled issues, radical Islam was growing its base. The bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia created fertile ground for spreading radical Islam in the Balkans. The governments of the Balkan countries were building their nations, driven by nationalism. On the other hand, Europe was trying to influence and transform the communist Balkan states into new EU partners. At the same time, radical Islamists found ways to exploit the conditions political, social and economic to expand their influence. The inability of the Balkan countries to provide economically strong societies and democratic institutions is a factor that threatens the stability of the region.

However, 20 years have passed since the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Western Balkans countries are still in transition. This very turbulent recent history makes the Western Balkans a region facing challenges that are very hard to overcome. The Western Balkans countries are trying to meet the challenges of transformation towards EU membership, while at the same time facing ethnic disputes and nationalism.

#### Nationalism produce nationalism

The 1990s were the key period during which the radical Islamists exploited opportunities to shift their focus from the Middle East to their main targets, the US and

Europe. As sanctuaries disappeared and opportunities dried up in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the fortunate timing of the Bosnian war provided the opportunity to move the experienced jihadists fighters from Afghanistan to European soil.<sup>54</sup> Nationalism and the struggle for self-identification as a result of historically rooted disputes during the 1990s seemingly overwhelmed the Balkans. At the same time, the radical Islamists were working towards only one agenda, to spread their ideology to West.

One of the key factors that has retarded the Balkans' development has been nationalism. It is now clear that the former Yugoslav federation was Tito's artificial creation, based on the common interest of fighting fascism in World War II. However, all of the former Yugoslav republics had been separate countries before World War I. Serbia had been a kingdom, and most of the Serbians after the Second World War continued to believe in the Serbian kingdom. Tito's strong antinationalist politics of "brotherhood and unity" was the only ideology that kept the Western Balkans nations in one federation.<sup>55</sup> However, the Serbians did not like Tito's antinationalist policy, especially in Kosovo, which, from medieval times, had been Serbian territory. However, by the 20th century its population was 90 percent Albanian and only 10 percent Serbian.<sup>56</sup> Serbian politicians in Belgrade neglected the ethnic disparity and did everything to preserve Kosovo as a cornerstone of Serbian nationalism and the Serbian Church. On the other hand, the majority of the Kosovo Albanians wanted to have full rights as separate republic. The result of this nationalism from both sides was a revolt by Albanians. Milosevic exploited Serbians' nationalistic feelings and placed himself as the President of the Republic of Serbia by rescinding the autonomy of Kosovo and the Vojvodina region by 1989.<sup>57</sup> The rest of the Yugoslav republics did not share Milosevic's Serbian nationalist view, and

they left the Yugoslav communist congress in 1990. Each of the republics started its own nationalistic policy to defend their future in the federation.

By the end of 1990, elections were held and the breakup of the federation was imminent. The political establishment in each of the new governments consisted of former communists who saw themselves as protectors of their nationality. Nationalistic rhetoric had a strong base in their political campaigns in order to gain popular support. The desperate economic situation of the Yugoslav federation by the 1990s, continued its downward slide while at the same time nationalism rose, and again overwhelmed the Western Balkans.<sup>58</sup> Ethnic disputes between the Serbs and Croats that had occurred before and during WWII rose again. At the same time, aspirations to adjust the federation's boundaries along ethnic boundaries became a priority in their political agendas. Each of the republics started to transform their Territorial Defense Forces into the new republican armies in order to prevent Milosevic from exploiting the predominantly Serb or Montenegrin officer corps of the Yugoslav National Army–JNA in order to suppress the separatist tendencies.<sup>59</sup> Slovenia and Croatia announced their independence, and by the June 1991, they had broken from the federation. Milosevic used the JNA to resist their independence with the result of over one million refugees.<sup>60</sup> Macedonia declared independence in September 1991 without any confrontation with Milosevic because of the agreement with Macedonian leader Kiro Gligorov for the peaceful withdrawal of the JNA. Milosevic used this opportunity to focus his forces on Croatia and Bosnia.

Bosnia was the most diverse republic. It had no majority or minority nationality group. The Bosnian population was about 43.7 percent Muslim, 31.4 percent Serb and

17.3 Croat.<sup>61</sup> Alija Izetbegovic was the leader of the Muslim Party of Democratic Action. He knew that war with Serbia was inevitable, because the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, was well supported by Milosevic, despite their differences in political orientation. In some sense, in 1991 both Izetbegovic and Milosevic shared the same nationalistic ideas, that ethnic boundaries needed to be revised and exchanges of populations were inevitable. Establishing a new Bosnian country was a logical move, due to the rising of nationalism. Izetbegovic was trying to establish a new Bosnia as a Muslim country, where only Muslims would have the right to full citizenship.<sup>62</sup> His goal was for Bosnia to become a member of Organization of the Islamic Conference<sup>63</sup> in order to be recognized as a Muslim state. This decision gave clear signals to the Bosnian Serbs that there would be no place for Serbians in the Muslim country of Bosnia. Izetbegovic's vision for establishing a Muslim country triggered Serbs to turn violent towards Muslims, too.

At the beginning, Izetbegovic lacked military forces to protect Bosniaks and state legitimacy. Financial support from Arab countries and political support from the international community were key factors in establishing the new Bosnian state. He exploited the international community's aversion to the Serbian regime, and he tried to show that the Muslims were the only victims and that they needed immediate help from the international community. To the West, Izetbegovic was trying to build the multiethnic state of Bosnia. One author asserts, however, that he was rebuilding the ethnically clean Muslim brigades, like the Bosnian Muslim Handzar Division, the same one from WWII that fought with the Nazis.<sup>64</sup> After the end of the conflict in Bosnia Herzegovina and the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Accords, Izetbegovic stated that he was focused on

creating the Bosnian Muslim state in combination with western standards and values. Izetbegovic publicly stated in front of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Tehran on 11 December 1997, that western values are important and the Muslims should respect them, learn from them and cooperate with them.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, Islamists who had gained self-confidence and experience in Afghanistan during the Russian invasion had reached the culmination point there. They used the Bosnian conflict to connect foreign Muslim fighters from Afghanistan with unsophisticated but eager terrorist recruits from Western Europe, and could form new plans for the future of the jihad.<sup>66</sup> Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya, which were already sponsoring the Islamists' ideology, were among the first to respond with financial support for building the Muslim Bosnian state.<sup>67</sup> The Bosnia conflict offered opportunities - lack of security control, ethnical disputes, nationalism, porous borders and most important is great number of Muslim population - that radical Islamists simply exploited.

Izetbegovic opened the door to Bosnia to experienced mujahidin fighters from Afghanistan in order to build the Bosnian army that he was missing. By the end of the 1992, Islamists from Afghanistan were establishing roots in European soil. In mid 1993, the first mujahidin unit was formed. Izetbegovic was the "honorable" commander of the first mujahidin brigade El-Mujahidin.<sup>68</sup> Mujahidin were coming from different Muslim countries, from Algeria to Afghanistan and were led by an Algerian known as Abu Maali.<sup>69</sup> This unit was attached to the Bosnian government army. During the Bosniaks' struggle against the Serbs and Croats, these mujahidin were welcomed, because of their spirit to fight.

There are no confirmed numbers of how many foreign fighters fought in Bosnia. After the conclusion of the Dayton agreement, NATO officials considered mujahidin to be a passive threat, because some of them left and many went underground to wait and see what was going to happen.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the number is not important; but what is significant is the influence that these foreign fighters enjoyed and still have in the Muslim society in the Western Balkans. Many of them stayed to seek some kind of better future. They kept the way of religious fundamental life and spread the ideology, views and values of Muslim society. During the conflict, when they arrived in Bosnia, many Bosniaks were suspicious and some hostile to them, because of their radical religious and ideological practices.<sup>71</sup> However, time is a critical factor. As long as they stayed, they had the potential to develop their influence.

In 2006, under strong pressure from the international community, the Bosnian government declared that it would revoke the passports of foreign fighters, which were issued as a reward for fighting for Bosnia, and deport them to their home countries.<sup>72</sup> However, a long time had passed since 1995. The mujahidin who stayed had established strong roots, and from what had been perceived as a passive threat from 1996, they had become an active threat to Bosnian society. Their aggressiveness toward those who did not agree with their ideology made them isolated and free from outside interference.<sup>73</sup>

After 9/11, the international community, especially the US, exerted pressure on the Balkan countries and especially Bosnia to reexamine their security systems and take proactive measures in combating terrorism. A major reason for this pressure was to make sure that the Bosnian government would carry out the promises and assurances from 1996 that dealt with mujahidin fighters. However, this had not been the policy during the

1990s, when the radical Islamists started growing roots in European soil. The policy of the western governments had been to find the best way to help the Bosnian Muslims.<sup>74</sup> The official attitude was that the Muslims were the victims. At the same time, the US government proposed programs to equip and train the Bosnian Muslims and Croats, but only if the Bosnian government stopped receiving arms shipments from Iran.<sup>75</sup> The western authorities, especially the US, followed the same policy that they had used in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. The US did not support the mujahidin or a Muslim government directly; the US just did not oppose arms shipments to the Bosnian Muslims from Iran through Croatia, as US former US Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith asserted during a congressional hearing in 1996.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the results from this situation are most important. It seems that no one was opposing the Iranian arms shipments and support for the mujahidin who were fighting in Bosnia.

By implication, Western policy contributed to creating favorable conditions for radical Islamists, who gained strength more than US and Europe policymakers had expected. The source of this miscalculation was the different perspective of the US and the EU vis-à-vis the radical Islamists' goal and strategy. The US and Europe, it seems, were focusing on countering one threat, but at the same time, creating another. The Milosevic regime represented a threat to Europe because he continued the communist regime and wanted to expand his influence all over the western Balkans. The goal for Western Europe was to transform the Western Balkan countries and put them on track towards EU integration. However, the radical Islamists did not have the same goals. They did not care about building the state or EU integration and economic development. In contrast, their goals were to spread radical Islam and to defeat the ~~infidels~~ from west."



They apparently saw the Bosnian war as a means to get to their end. The main idea was to defeat the West and to have a transnational Islamic community based on the same religion.<sup>77</sup>

#### Radical Islamists expansion in the Balkans during the 1990s

During the 1990s, the Balkans was not the only region to experience turbulence related to radical Islamists' movement towards Europe. In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the mujahidin found themselves under a lot of pressure, partly because their ranks included many foreign fighters, whose presence was no longer welcome in the region. Their freedom of movement was limited. Many of them were foreigners who had been expelled from their country of origin. They were experienced mujahidin from anti-Soviet jihad, hungry to continue the jihad against infidels elsewhere.<sup>78</sup>

In 1993, the government of Pakistan decided to deny Pakistani territory for the many offices and logistical bases Afghanistan jihadists had established during the campaign against the Soviets.<sup>79</sup> The main purpose of these offices was to provide the manpower and logistical support for the jihad in Afghanistan. Under strong international influence, Pakistan decided to close all the mujahidin offices and all the illegal foreign fighters that remained in Pakistan were to be deported.<sup>80</sup> However, this denial of movement in Pakistan led mujahidin veterans to disperse into South Asia for new lives, and some of them moved to continue the jihad in Bosnia.<sup>81</sup>

The war in Bosnia provided an outlet for the experienced mujahidin fighters. It also proved to be an opportunity to get experienced mujahidin fighters onto European soil

and connect them with Islamists from Europe who had potential, but less experience, to proceed with the Islamic struggle. The mujahidin came to Bosnia through Western Europe, specially Germany, France, Italy, Britain, and Austria, utilizing the already established Muslim immigrant workers network.<sup>82</sup> From their Middle Eastern country of origin, they often found their way to Austria and then Croatia, where the government of Franjo Tudjman welcomed the mujahidin as fighters against the Serbs, and finally on to Bosnia their destination.<sup>83</sup> This well organized network exploited the blend of corruption, conspiracy, and non-transparency of financial activity, and set the stage for the successful laundering and movements of billions of dollars to Bosnia in support of mujahidin. The Muslim government in Bosnia opened the door to experienced fighters, who served as a moral booster and brought to bear combat power. —Mustafa Ceric, the grand mufti of Sarajevo and the Party of Democratic Action—SDA's favorite imam, was more honest: We invited the mujahidin to Bosnia, he boasted after the war. We should be grateful to the mujahidin.<sup>84</sup> Historically, the Bosnian Muslims had been moderate in their religion and open to other ethnicities because they all lived in one small place. The injection of the mujahedin into the Bosnian moderate society created the potential to move the practice of the Islam towards a more fundamental approach, while encouraging the embrace of jihad against infidels. Beyond Bosnia Herzegovina, the large Muslim population throughout the Balkans presented fertile ground for the spread of their influence to Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, and Macedonia.

### Kosovo

In a study of ungoverned territories in 2007, Rand researchers defined ungoverned territory both with respect to physical space and to the level of state control, the degree to

which the state has control of normal government functions. Ungoverned territories can be failed or failing states; poorly controlled land or maritime borders or airspace; or areas within otherwise viable states where the central government's authority does not extend. Ungoverned territories can thus be found along a continuum of state control.<sup>85</sup> Kosovo has fit this definition. For a little less than 20 years, Kosovo was a UN protectorate without a government empowered to take state control of political and security issues. Today, Kosovo has a government, which lacks the political experience to face the challenges of a postwar period and to strengthen the fragile ethnic relations between ethnic Albanian and Serbs. The NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) and even the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) have operated under various limitations and national caveats were prevented to take critical actions to improve the rule of law and mitigate the security threats. KFOR forces protect Kosovo from all threats; however, they can be minimally effective as the Kosovo police are responsible to provide internal security for its citizens. The mandate of KFOR is focused on preventing ethnic violence and facilitating the safe return of refugees.<sup>86</sup>

Kosovo represents a continuation of the factors that contribute to political and security instability that radical Islamists can exploit to strengthen their base. Kosovo was an autonomous and underdeveloped region within the Yugoslav federation, and all of the other Yugoslav republics contributed financially to Kosovo for its development. However, Kosovo remained underdeveloped and continuously struggled for independence. During the 1970s and 1980s, Kosovo's population was about 1.9 million, of which 85 percent were Albanians, 13.2 percent Serbs and 1.8 percent members of other nationalities.<sup>87</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the Muslim Albanian population had grown

rapidly to become about 90 percent of Kosovo's population. Along with the growth of the Muslim Albanian population, ethnic tension with the Serbs was increasing.

The first Kosovo national and religious awakening started in 1989 and produced demands for the recognition of Kosovo as the seventh republic of the Yugoslav federation. The Yugoslav government ruthlessly suppressed the Kosovo Albanian demonstrations.<sup>88</sup> In 1989, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic annexed Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. Soon thereafter, violence in Kosovo escalated to the point where the international community took on an active role in attempting to resolve the ethnic dispute. For the second time in less than a 10 years, the international community unintentionally sided with a Muslim minority in a struggle against a Serbian foe. While the international community engaged in stopping the actions of Milosevic, first through diplomacy and then by force in Kosovo, they miscalculated the second and third order effect of openly supporting the Albanian Muslims. Intervening in another conflict in the Western Balkans potentially presented a second opportunity for already established radical Islamists from Bosnia to continue with engaging the "infidels" and protect the Muslims.

Religion has been the key factor behind the ability of radical Islamists from Bosnia, who were still active in the Balkans, to start spreading roots into Kosovo. This underdeveloped region, which was recovering from ethnic conflict and lacked a clear political or economic future, became fertile ground for radical Islamists to spread their ideology. Islamic charities, for example, played a key role in financing and providing logistical support during the Kosovo conflict.<sup>89</sup> US security agencies investigate an Islamic charity organization, which claimed to support refugees from Kosovo, but

actually laundered money, which was sent back to fighters from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).<sup>90</sup> Islamic charities were already well established during the Bosnian conflict, and Kosovo became the venue for the continuation of their work to spread Islamic influence. The Kosovars' cooperation with the radical Islamists was a marriage of convenience. The Kosovo Albanians were focused on Kosovo independence and the creation of ethnic Albanian state. Albanian Muslims identified themselves as guerrilla forces for Kosovo liberation. None of them viewed themselves as mujahidin. The war with Serbia was one of liberation and independence, not jihad against the infidels. The radical Islamists were focused on spreading and supporting the jihad and creation of a pure Muslim state. Despite these differences, they mutually supported each other. As an example, according to one source, in 1998 the Kosovo Albanians welcomed one mujahidin brigade.<sup>91</sup> Because of the strong influence of the international community especially the US, generally Albanian Muslims are oriented towards the West. It appears that the influence of the radical Islamists is limited due to the Kosovars' national identification as Albanians, and not as Muslims. Nonetheless, Kosovo provides fertile ground for more illegal activities by the organized crime groups.<sup>92</sup> Radical Islamists may very well exploit these conditions. The threat from the radical Islamists is a long-term one. It is very hard to change the mindset and religious beliefs that had been built over many years. The younger generation of the Albanians who see no prosperity and bleak future prospects could be an easy target for radical Islamists.

#### Long lasting transition

The states of the Western Balkans have been in a period of difficult transition since the breakup of Yugoslavia. This transition has included internal changes in

leadership and an evolving (and often rough-and-tumble) political environment, the always-future prospect of EU membership, and regional integration initiatives proffered primarily by actors from outside the region. The longer these transition processes stretch out, the more potential that destabilizing forces—like radical Islamists—can exploit the peoples' unmet expectations for their own ends.

In the process of democratic development, political and economical reforms need to be conducted in parallel. However, the Western Balkans countries are making political reforms while trying to recover from armed conflict. Building democratic society is a very complex process. Political reforms ensure a stable climate for investment and economic reforms, which in turn ensure a stable and competitive market, which in turn contributes to political successes. The tendency is for political reform to start without any clear vision of support by economical reforms. This is the case in the Western Balkans. The bloody dissolution of the Yugoslav federation boosted nationalism and ethnic disputes. The Western Balkans countries have suffered from chronic political instability, lack of rule of law, and high unemployment rates. This environment makes them susceptible to terrorism and organized crime.

Leaders' personal agendas, rather than political accord and movement toward achieving the changes the EU requires for membership, appeared to be the primary interest in the Western Balkans states. However, by 2001, the leadership had changed and new leaders became more willing to transform societies into democratic ones and they declared that their policy would be alignment with the EU integration process. Nonetheless, the leaders formed the second echelon of the previous one, and their mindset was not that much different from that of their predecessors. Changes in political

elites has not necessarily precipitated political and economic development. For example, there are two major political parties in Macedonia and many smaller ones, including the political parties of all the minorities. Since independence from the Yugoslav federation, only the two major political parties have been in charge of the government. However, they have had to form coalitions with the smaller ones in order to have enough seats in the Parliament. Many times, the majority parties have made promises to the smaller political parties just to form the bigger coalition to win the seats in the Parliament. This coalition building has sometimes been accompanied by constitutional shortcuts in order to keep the political coalition with the smaller parties together. The opposition party just adds fuel to the fire, and accuses the ruling party of inability of ruling the government. Political dialog decreases and the prospects for achieving mutual agreement on national development take a back seat to political maneuvering.

The aforementioned political environment produces political instability, which means that the first of the Copenhagen criteria for membership in the EU is not met. Satisfaction of the second and the third criteria remain quite far down the road. The inability to achieve mutual understanding for further national development makes it hard to achieve agreement for regional or international cooperation. The continuous struggle for political power does not promise a stable political environment and prosperous economic future. These conditions have significant influence on the socio-economic status of the people and make them susceptible to different ideologies. Full EU membership for the Western Balkans countries is not the solution to overcome the obstacles to further democratic development. Regardless, at the end of the day, none of the Western Balkans countries is in a position to meet the Copenhagen criteria -

democratic institutions, rule of law, economic capability to cope with competitive markets and the ability to assume the obligations as a member—required for membership.

The very slow process of transformation of the Western Balkans countries toward meeting the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership will contribute to EU enlargement fatigue.<sup>93</sup> Prolonging the process of integration and screening of the Western Balkan states by the EU will put the countries a cycle of continuous reform. If this process continues for a long time, the political stability of individual aspirant countries may become uncertain. As a result, the political elites in each country might be more hesitant to make decisions because they might not understand goals set by EU that they need to reach. At the same time, they might view possible decisions as politically unacceptable. It seems that the conditions for meeting the Copenhagen criteria prove ever more challenging for the Western Balkan countries to meet.

The Western Balkans countries are in a great struggle. They need to overcome the mindset from the communist period while transforming into democratic societies and recovering from ethnic conflict. This environment will challenge the legitimacy of the Western Balkans countries by the weakness of government structures, slow progress toward the rule of law, corruption, and organized crime.”<sup>94</sup> As long as the Western Balkans countries are led by political-criminal groups, as remnants from the communist period, the process of building the democratic society will be very slow and will still remain as the threat to fragile ethnic relationships.<sup>95</sup> If this type of political establishment remains in power, and they are still involved in illicit activities,<sup>96</sup> and if the countries continue to fall short in the fight against corruption and organized crime, conditions will favor radical Islamists’ recruitment and illicit activities.



Lately we hear more of the initiative of creation of Balkan community. The Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe is an example of such an effort. This initiative did not come from the Western Balkan countries; rather, its source is the US and the EU. Until all of the US and EU efforts, initiatives, and projects become the Western Balkan states' own endeavors, however, the Western Balkan countries will remain in a state of transition. The transitional conditions - political, economic and social - directly influence the security situation. Politically and economically stable countries that can provide a secure future will reduce the risk of recruitment of young Muslims by radical Islamists.

#### The Balkan Muslims and national identity

When a person embraced Islam during the time of the Prophet - peace be on him he would immediately cut himself off from *Jahiliyyah*. [The state of ignorance of the guidance from God.] When he stepped into the circle of Islam, he would start a new life, separating himself completely from his past life under ignorance of the divine Law. He would look upon the deeds during his life of ignorance with mistrust and fear, with a feeling that these were impure and could not be tolerated in Islam! With this feeling, he would turn toward Islam for new guidance; and if at any time temptations overpowered him, or the old habits attracted him, or if he became lax in carrying out the injunctions of Islam, he would become restless with a sense of guilt and would feel the need to purify himself of what had happened, and would turn to the Qur'an to mold himself according to its guidance.<sup>97</sup>

#### The Balkans Muslims

The Balkan Muslim population is very diverse. Islam in the Balkans has traditionally taken the form of Sufi mysticism, and remained untouched by Wahhabi ideas and influences. Throughout the 20th century, Balkan Muslims in Bosnia and the Sandžak [region of Serbia] were relatively secular - although the latter were, and remain, more conservative.”<sup>98</sup> The roots of Islam in the Balkans are found in the Islamisation process of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted for 500 years (14th until 20th century). The

regime forced people to accept Islam as their religion in order to seek a better living status. The Ottomans treated the populace as the religion taught. Muslims enjoy the benefit, but non-Muslims deserve no treatment. Given the choice, many people left the Balkans.

Today, Muslims in the Balkans do not make up a homogenous community. Many of them are identified by region or state: in Bosnia they are Bosniaks, in Albania and Kosovo they are Albanians, in Bulgaria they are Pomaks and in Macedonia they are Torbesh.<sup>99</sup> They have their own political parties that are represented in the respective parliaments as minority or majority depending on the country. Integration into the democratic system as a part of the society gave them the opportunity to abandon the term “Muslim” and accept the national label as a term for self-identification. They have lived along with the non-Muslim population and exchanged cultural practices. Sharing cultural practice has made the religious boundaries very porous. For example, many Balkan Muslims have accepted the food practice of eating pork and drinking alcohol. During the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia, religious differences proved not to be the deciding factor; rather, it was historical ethnic disputes.

During the 1990s, simultaneously with the process of national identification for Balkan Muslims, a strengthening of relations with Islam from Middle Eastern Arab countries occurred. This process was accelerated from the nationalistic mindset of Izetbegovic, when he asked for assistance from Arab countries. However, the strong feelings for national identity and Balkan cultural practice cultivated over more than 50 years gave the Balkan Muslims resilience to resist the influence from the radical Islamists who based themselves in the Balkans.

## Strength of radical Islamists

Radical Islam represents a threat to democratic societies and to traditional Islam. The strength of radical Islamists comes from their ability to manipulate the Islamic religion. In addition, their strength comes from the West's misunderstanding of their ideology and tendency to generalize and perceive a single threat from radical Islamists. Radical Islamists have the advantage over the democratic societies because they can attack along three axes: political, ideological, and militant. On the political axis, radical Islam aims to attain political power at the national level. Ideologically, its purpose is to preserve the Muslim identity and Islamic faith and moral order against unbelievers. On the militant axis is jihad, the armed struggle, which is both irredentist (redeem Muslim land from unbelievers) and global (combating the West).<sup>100</sup> Radical Islamists pose a threat on several levels, for instance the political, where the struggle is for the establishment of states based on religion, and the moral, where they seek to influence and convert all moderate Muslims, who recognize themselves by the country or regional identity, into fundamentalist Muslims. Today, radical Islamists have the most success on the moral level by exploiting certain conditions created by lack of rule of law, uncertain economic future, democratic freedoms and human rights. At the third level is security, where the militant jihadists directly target non-Muslims. This threat has the greatest psychological effect. It aims to provoke democratic societies to overreact in order to protect themselves. Countering this threat requires great resources and commitment of security forces.

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## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The events of the past 20 years have contributed to setting favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. In the view of some observers, the Western Balkans is a hub for radical Islamists. This thesis focused on the identification of factors that contribute to the creation of favorable conditions for concentration of the radical Islamists in the Western Balkan, with intent to confirm or deny such view.

The past 20 years have been very turbulent in the Western Balkans, characterized by armed conflicts, stilted economic development, increased corruption and very slow development of democratic processes, along with strong pressure from the EU to integrate into the European family. All these events have had a significant influence on the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists. However, on the one hand, over the last five years the Western Balkans states have made noticeable progress in development and reconciliation. On the other hand, 20 years has been a very long period spent in disputes, conflicts and inconsistent economic and democratic development. During this period, radical Islamists attempted to use every opportunity to expand their influence and to get closer to their most desirable targets, the US and Europe.

The research of the thesis was conducted from three perspectives. It started with the European influence in the Western Balkans and its contribution to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists. The second perspective was of the Western Balkans situation and how it contributed to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists over the past 20 years. The last perspective focused on the Balkan

Muslims themselves, their role and how they contributed to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists is essential.

### European influence

In the analysis of European influence, there are three main areas that could contribute to the creation of favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans: Europe without borders, discriminations against European Muslims and European policy toward the Western Balkans.

These three areas cover key aspects that could create favorable conditions for radical Islamists in the Western Balkans, as well in the greater Balkans region. Discrimination against European Muslims creates conditions in which the Muslims in Europe tend to separate themselves in order to preserve their social integrity and, as a result, they resist full integration into European societies. This alienation- whether real or perceived - is a key element that radical Islamists would seek to exploit in order to spread their influence and to create fertile ground for illicit and violent activities. This situation in Europe could spill over to the Balkans, especially to the Western Balkans, where the largest number of Muslims reside on the continent. The changing attitudes, beliefs and behavior of the European Muslims might spread to the Muslims in the Western Balkans, too. Over time, the Balkan Muslims might start to sympathize with the European Muslims' fate. At the same time, radical Islamists do not have a set time line by which to achieve their goals. They neither want nor need quick results. They are focused on the end-state, no matter how long it takes. Bearing this in mind, it is likely a matter of time until the Muslims in the Western Balkans might change their attitudes, beliefs and behavior and become more supportive of radical Islamists.

The EU itself plays a significant role in the creation of factors in the Western Balkans favorable to radical Islamists. This is unintentional and reflects the second and third order effects from the EU's interaction with the Western Balkans countries.

Although the EU and the Western Balkans have had continuous geopolitical communication, the Western Balkans states were not part of any processes of European development. Long-lasting communist rule, conflicts and ethnic disputes have placed the Western Balkans always outside of Europe. At the same time, the EU has been building the European identity. These two opposing geopolitical situations - separation and integration - in the Balkans and Europe mark a significant boundary that will take years to overcome.

Since the Western Balkans is at the doorstep of the EU, the EU policy to the Western Balkans needs to be consistent. The goal is clear; the Western Balkans need to be integrated into the European family. What is more important is how the EU will achieve this goal. The policy itself is challenged by two elements, the transition of Western Balkan countries and lessons learned from the last EU enlargement. Different stages of the transitional process among the Western Balkans countries require separate approaches that will make the process even more challenging, since the decisions of the EU are consensus based. EU efforts might also find themselves in competition with bilateral cooperation between the separate Western Balkans countries and individual EU member states that will just widen the difference in the process of integration.

Concurrently, enlargement of the EU is strongly based on lessons learned from the last enlargement. The decision of the EU was that the Western Balkans need to be integrated, but there is no clear vision of how long this will take. Again, the decision is based on

consensus of the EU Members states and their own perspective of understanding of the importance of Western Balkan integration, as a result of which Western Balkans countries are still in the process of transition. The longer the transition process drags on and the prospects of EU membership remain seemingly forever in the future, the more likely that the peoples of the Western Balkans states may lose faith in European integration and become vulnerable to other paths offered by, for example, radical Islamists.

### The Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is the most geopolitically complex region in Europe. It has internal issues that have led to armed conflict. The turbulence of geopolitical events in the past two decades in the Western Balkans created favorable conditions for radical Islamists. The conditions that were created by the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, particularly the conflicts in Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo, created opportunities for radical Islamists from the Middle East to establish themselves on European soil.

The conflict in Bosnia had several characteristics that radical Islamists would have found attractive to help establish their footprint. These characteristics include the portrayal of Bosnian Muslims as victims, the presence of uncontrolled areas, and the potential for illicit activities; all of which are preconditions for radical Islamists' activities. From the beginning, the Balkan Muslims were reserved towards the radical Islamists' presence; however, they accepted them for their fighting skills. Accepting experience mujahidin from the Middle East to fight alongside the Bosnian Muslims and



then granting them citizenship allowed radical Islamists to establish themselves in Bosnian society.

The presence of Islamist fighters in Bosnia during and after the end of the conflict there is the best-documented evidence of a radical Islamist influence in the Western Balkans. The extent to which radical Islamists have been able to spread their influence in or through the Western Balkans, however, is less well documented. Specific political, social and economic conditions in the region and Europe as a whole present opportunities for exploitation by radical Islamists. Political instability and persistent corruption under conditions of still-developing democratic systems, alienated Muslim populations in Western Europe who perceive policies of integration as attempts at assimilation, and the seemingly unreachable prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans states contribute to the potential vulnerability of Muslims in the Balkans to the influence and ideology—and, possibly, coercion—of radical Islamists.

It is difficult to predict how long it will take for Balkan Muslims to become more susceptible to radical Islamists' ideology. The main difference between the Balkan Muslims and their co-religionists is the self-identification of the former by nationality, region or area where they live. The Balkan Muslims respect and practice Islam, but retain their national identity. This is the main reason that many Balkan Muslims do not agree with the radical Islamists. However, the main target group for the radical Islamists is more likely to be the young Balkan Muslims who face an uncertain socio-economic future.

The dearth of empirical evidence also complicates the task of determining whether radical Islamists perceive the Western Balkans as a base for the spread of radical

Islamist ideology in the region and in Europe as a whole. It is not apparent that the Western Balkans hold any strategic importance for the radical Islamists in their jihad. The potential remains, nonetheless, because the Western Balkans region is still the home to ongoing political processes that can foster corruption, organize crime and ethnic disputes, as well as challenge socio-economic progress. To the extent that these conditions persist, it will represent fertile ground for radical Islamists.

### Recommendations

It may seem that the Western Balkans is a region where the ethnic disputes are now less likely; however, the changing of the security environment over the past decade has produced a new latent threat: radical Islamists. More study is required to determine the threat from the radical Islamists in the Western Balkans. The real contribution to the study will include the findings and opinions of experts and scholars from the Western Balkans.

From a policy perspective, the Western Balkans countries are not even close to the strength of democratic and security systems of the Western European states and the US, who have found themselves at different times over the last decade or so surprised, wounded and even humbled by the actions of radical Islamists. Tracking the history and activities of radical Islamists is not enough. The Western Balkans countries need to take proactive measures to counter the latent threat posed by radical Islamists. There is an old saying that is coming from the Western Balkan culture: “It is better to prevent instead to cure.” “To prevent” requires knowledge and understanding of the threat and the conditions under which it can fester and grow.

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